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The standard bearers: Governing teachers through professional standards

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Abstract

Teacher professional standards have become a key policy mechanism for the reform of teaching and education in recent years. While standards policies claim to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools today, this paper argues that a disjunction exists between the stated intentions of such programmes and the intelligibility of the practices of government in which they are invested. To this effect, the paper conducts an analytics of government of the recently released *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2011) arguing that the explicit, calculated rationality of the programme exists within a wider field of effects. Such analysis has the critical consequence of calling into question the claims of the programmers themselves thus breaching the self-evidence on which the standards rest.

Key words: Governmentality, teacher professional standards, political rationalities, practices of government, education policy

Introduction

Teacher professional standards have become a key policy mechanism for the reform of teaching and education in recent years. In Australia, such policies have led to teacher standards becoming national in scope, uniform in approach and co-extensive with professional practice from preservice teacher education to practice as a teacher across the career span (e.g. Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL] 2011). Most of the scholarly research on teacher standards, however, comprises 'meta-narratives of promise' (Dean 2010: 54): teacher standards are elaborated either as models of social progress or as dialectics of salvation (cf. Dean 1994). While very different forms of intellectual practice, both of these approaches—the *progressivist* and the *critical*—are enamoured with the promise of the Enlightenment (Dean 2010). In progressivist research, teacher standards are considered part of the ongoing and progressive rationalization of teaching, schooling and education and the means by which new aspects of teachers' lives can be brought under control and enhanced (e.g. Hattie 2012; Ingvarson 2010; Ingvarson and Hattie 2008; Mayer et al. 2005; Yinger and Hendricks-Lee 2000). In critical research, teacher standards are understood dialectically as part of a rationalization that is both oppressive and liberating (e.g. Apple 2001; Bates 2007; Hargreaves 2003; Sachs 2005). As such, they are part of a process which holds out the promise of emancipation and secular salvation for teachers.

This paper, by contrast, adopts a more *problematizing* intellectual approach inspired by the Foucaultian perspective of governmentality and post-realist social-scientific research more

generally (e.g. Dean 2010; Foucault 1991; Kendall and Wickham 1999; Higgins and Lerner 2010; Rose 1999). This is an approach which remains open to the disparity, difference and indeterminacy of mutating events and historical change, seeking to problematize the ‘answers’ provided by narratives of progress and reconciliation. It is concerned with both the discursive and material relations through which objects of knowledge are produced and rendered workable, and with the consequences of this for relations of power (Higgins and Lerner 2010). In short, it is an approach which—to use Foucault’s striking formula—refuses the “‘blackmail’ of the Enlightenment”, to be for or against it (Foucault 2000: 312).

This paper thus problematizes teacher standards and concerns itself with the consequences of such standards for the relations of power in which teachers are enmeshed. To this effect, the paper views teacher standards as an advanced liberal ‘practice of government’—that is, as a more or less calculated activity aimed at shaping teachers’ professional conduct by techniques which work not only through teachers’ freedom and agency but also through indirect means for the surveillance and regulation of that agency (Dean 2010; Rose 1999). While policies of teacher professional standards claim that standards will improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools today, the paper argues that a dissonance exists between the stated intentions of such programmes and the effects of the practices of government in which such programmes are invested.

To this effect, the paper will first clarify what it means to think ‘governmentally’ about teacher standards. Second, it will turn to a recent problematization of standardizing given programmatic form in *The National Professional Standards for Teachers* (NPST) (AITSL 2011). By pointing to the dissonance between the programme’s explicit, calculated rationality—the ‘programmer’s view’—and the strategic effects of the practice of government for teachers, the programmers’ claims may be called into question and the self-evidence on which the standards rest, breached (Foucault 1991).¹

Thinking ‘Governmentally’ about Teacher Professional Standards

Governmentality provides a powerful analytic and diagnostic perspective on what Foucault called the ‘art of government’ (Brockling, Krasmann and Lemke 2011: 11). As a research approach, it is now a well established and widely adopted within the social sciences (e.g. Brockling, Krasmann and Lemke 2011; Dean 2010, 1994; Kendall and Wickham 1999; Miller and Rose 2008; Peters, Besley, Olssen, Maurer and Weber 2009; Rose 1999).

Analysing power relations from the angle of the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Brockling, Krasmann and Lemke 2011: 2) means examining the conditions of governing others and ourselves. This entails analysing the ‘political rationalities’ and ‘programmes of government’ by which reality is rendered thinkable and made amendable to calculation and programming; the ‘technologies of government’ by which such rationalized schemes are translated into the domain of reality; and the ‘subjectivities’ through which governing operates and which specific practices and programmes of government try to form (Dean 2010; Miller and Rose 2008). Importantly, programmes for the reform of conduct—from White Papers to school rules—are internal to the workings of practices of government; they are not, as Dean (2010: 32) cautions, ‘their *raison d’être*’. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between the explicit, calculated programmatic rationality of a practice of government and its non-subjective intentionality (Dean 2010) given that such practices ‘possess up to a point their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence and “reason”’ (Foucault 1991: 75; Dean 2010).

The Programmer's View of the NPST

The programme of government of the NPST (AITSL 2011) is a plan devised by AITSL and implemented in February 2011 for addressing what has been constructed as a problem in the government of teachers and schooling in Australia for over two decades (e.g. Schools Council 1989): 'teacher quality' (AITSL 2011: 1). Unlike earlier policy forays by various Commonwealth governments and state agencies over this period, the programme of the NPST represents the first national set of professional standards for teachers in Australia. As such, the National Standards now supersede teacher standards from all other jurisdictions. Through state and territory teacher regulation authorities, they are now being deployed in the re-accreditation of courses of initial teacher education, the registration ('licensing' and 'certification') of graduate teachers, and the 'performance development' of practicing teachers over the course of their career (AITSL 2011: 2).

The explicit programmatic rationality of the NPST (AITSL 2011) is a response to the problematization of teacher quality. The rationality draws on a knowledge of teacher professional practice amongst other epistemologies and moralities of political power in an endeavour to grasp the truth of this sphere and re-present it in a form such that it is amenable to conscious political action. Fundamental to the rationality is its claim that teachers are vital to educational reform. Teachers, the programme declares, 'account for the vast majority of expenditure in school education and have the greatest impact on student learning, far outweighing the impact of any other program or policy' (AITSL 2011: 1). Given this, the rationality proclaims itself as a means for improving the 'effectiveness' of teachers through an enhanced and more accountable teacher professionalism. The National Standards, the programme insists, 'define the work of teachers and make explicit the elements of high quality, effective teaching in 21st century schools which results in improved educational outcomes for students' (AITSL 2011: 2). Such outcomes, maintains the programme, 'contribute to the professionalization of teaching and raise the status of the profession'; they provide 'the basis for a professional accountability model'; and they 'inform the development of professional learning goals' (AITSL 2011: 2). Thus, through a framework of seven standards clustered into three domains of teaching (viz. 'professional knowledge', 'professional practice' and 'professional engagement') and applied to four distinct career stages (viz. 'graduate', 'proficient', 'highly accomplished' and 'lead') (AITSL 2011), the programme of government of the NPST sets out its 'solution' to the problematization of teacher quality.

Justification for the NPST and the authority for the authority to govern teachers according to its grammars of conduct are translated into the programme from the field of political discourse. The particular political rationality of the practice of government of the NPST can be diagnosed through an analytics of the discourses integrated into the programme and through the 'external relations of intelligibility' (Foucault 1991: 77) that can be constructed through such analysis. One discourse contributing to the morality, epistemology and vocabulary (Rose 1999) of the rationality of the NPST is that of professional autonomy. It is constituted in the programme by recourse to progressivist scholarly research such as that of Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (2007 cited in AITSL 2011: 22). These authors argue that the professionalization of teaching—and the professional autonomy this implies—necessitates explicit 'research and knowledge-based standards' that 'can convey the professional qualifications of teachers by creating a shared and public language of practice' (Yinger and

Hendricks-Lee 2007: 94). Through the construction of an external relation of intelligibility with the research of Yinger and Hendricks-Lee, the discourse of professional autonomy can be identified as a principle by which the government of teachers was rationalized through programmes of professional standards as far back as middle decades of the 20th century. In 1946, for instance, McDonald (1951) was calling for the establishment of what, in the US, became the National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards. This involved calling on teachers themselves—if they were to form a profession—to play a determining role within that body (McDonald 1951: 165). The seeming continuity of the notion of professional autonomy in the rationalities of government of teachers over time, however, is matched only by its discontinuity (O’Farrell 2005). In its earlier deployment in the rationalization of the government of teachers as an emerging profession, professional autonomy may be considered a ‘substantive’ rationality of rule (Rose 1996): teacher professionalism was to be more or less directly transcribed into the machinery and objectives of government for the securitization of social and economic processes (Dean 2010). In its deployment in the NPST today, by contrast, teacher autonomy and professionalism are reconceptualised in a more ‘formal’ manner (Rose 1996): penetrated by a market mentality, they take on a technical modality and become a means for reforming the very governmental process of teachers’ performance itself (Dean, 2010).

Other discourses contributing to the rationality of the NPST are those of professional responsibility and accountability. Again, once a substantive rationality of government in the securitization of social and economic processes, professional responsibility is now reconceptualised as a technical modality in the government of professionals themselves. This is constituted in the political rationality of the NSPT by the programme’s recourse to studies by conservative policy bodies such as the Grattan Institute (Jensen 2010 cited in AITSL 2011: 22) and to progressivist scholarly research including that of Australian academic John Hattie (2003 cited in AITSL 2011: 22) and global educational policy analysts Barber and Mourshed (2007 cited in AITSL 2011: 22). The intellectual practice undertaken by these researchers emphasizes teacher quality as the ‘main driver’ for improving national educational systems (e.g. Barber and Mourshed 2007). All other factors—such as the quality of school students or levels of educational provision (Coffield 2012)—are excluded. Thus, complexity and multiple causation in educational outcomes are ignored in this research: explanatory logic is reduced to teachers’ conduct alone. Through the mutual intelligibility established between the discourse of professional responsibility and the thinking of the NPST programmers faced with the need to find an authority for their authority, professional responsibility is translated from the discursive field into the rationality of the NPST itself. A rationality of accountability is then invoked by the NPST—through appeals in the programme to discourses of accountability and professional standards (e.g. OECD 2009 cited in AITSL 2011: 22)—so that teachers’ conduct might be locked into the optimization of performance. In presenting itself as a way of restoring trust in the profession, however, this rationality presupposes a culture of mistrust—a culture which it, itself, contributes to, produces and intensifies.

The Strategic Effects of the Practice of Government of the NPST

The strategic effects of the NPST as a practice of government can be constructed through an analytics of the operation of the practices in which the programme itself is invested—but never exhausts. Such programmes may seek to orient practices toward specific purposes and goals but the effects are never uniform and complete; they are only ever partial, piecemeal

and contingent due to the reality, density and logic of the practices themselves (Dean 2010; Kendall and Wickham 1999).

The most obvious but far-reaching strategic effect of the practice of standardizing of the NPST is that it exists within a specific set of relations of power. The programmatic rationality of the NPST represents itself as a professional, not political initiative. The National Standards, the programme asserts, are ‘shaped by the profession’—‘[validated] by almost 6,000 teachers’—for the ‘improvement of teacher quality’ and the ‘positive public standing of the profession’ (AITSL 2011: 1). The strategic effect of the NPST as a practice of government, however, implicates teachers in a new diagram of power comprising an increasing number of agencies, including AITSL itself. While the programmatic rationality portrays itself as enhancing teachers’ autonomy, valuing their professional responsibility, and defending their professional standing through accountability measures, the strategic effect of the practice—made translatable with a myriad of other unexamined but imputed rationalities and practices of government—is much more widespread. First, professional autonomy becomes connected to the advanced liberal practice of autonomization (Rose 1999): teachers are freed from bureaucratic and hierarchical lines of authority to pursue a more professional destiny. Second, professional responsibility becomes attached to the advanced liberal practice of responsabilization (Rose 1999): now autonomized, teachers become responsible for that destiny and, seemingly, for the destiny of the education as a whole. Finally, accountability becomes integrated into the advanced liberal practice of audit (Rose 1999): professional standards become the means for the surveillance and regulation of teachers’ new agency and the optimization of its performance (Dean 2010).

A second strategic effect of the practice of standardizing of the NPST is that it entails technologies of government that seek to qualitatively transform the subjectivity of the teacher. The subject promoted by the rationality of the NPST—and one with which it seeks teachers to identify—is that of the ‘effective’ teacher (AITSL 2011: 1). This is a subject who is able to use the National Standards ‘to recognize their current and developing capabilities, professional aspirations and achievements’ (AITSL 2011: 2) and thus contribute to the improvement of teacher quality. Once again, however, the rationality of the NPST exists within a wider field of effects. The technologies of government by which authorities seek to install the programme of the NPST specify a subject which is not only different from that which it is displacing—the teacher of duty, dependency, habit, and commitment and obligation to others—but discordant with the programme’s own rather under played notion of the effective teacher. This is the new subject of the teacher as an actively responsible and calculable professional. Two technologies of government of the NPST which seek to form this subject are, first, assessment in preservice teacher education and, second, professional learning in teachers’ professional practice.

A course in teacher education at a large Australian university comprises an assessment item which requires students assess their own learning in terms of the relevant state-based professional standards for teachers—standards which articulate with the NPST and are in the process of being replaced by them. The assessment item (QUT 2012) is a course accreditation requirement of the relevant teacher standards regulatory authority and has ‘meta’ status in terms of its assessment of learning across the entire course, rather than at the level of an individual subject or subject cluster as tends to be the convention. Of significance here is that the assessment item effectively asks students to audit their university learning in terms of the teacher standards. This action not only penetrates the ‘enclosure of expertise’ of the university through a form of marketization—the decisions of students as consumers—but

respecifies the preservice teacher as an actively responsible and calculable professional-in-preparation. Preservice teachers are enjoined to become more active in inspecting the programme of teacher education in which they are ‘investing’, but must take on the responsibility for the choices they make in doing so. In this way, through a distinctly advanced liberal strategy of rule, the government of preservice teachers is accomplished: By seeking to maximise the quality of their professional experience through acts of choice which both service a version of their professionalism they take to be their own and align them with the sanctioned “community” of the regulatory authority, the preservice teacher becomes an active agent in the planned regeneration of the profession (cf. Rose 1996, 1999).

A second technology of government which seeks to form the subjectivity of the teacher as an actively responsible and calculable professional is that of professional learning. While the programme of the NPST identifies professional learning as a standard of effective and quality teaching (AITSL 2011: Standard Six), the technology of professional learning instantiates this in practice and translates cognate technologies of autonomization and responsabilization to form the teacher as an active individual seeking to ‘enterprise’ themselves. Teachers are given responsibility for their professional learning; the terms of the ‘calculative regime’ are known to all participants and, to a certain extent, teachers are free to get to the (professional learning) ends any way they choose (AITSL 2012a; Kendall 2005; King and Kendall 2004). The emphasis on teachers’ professional learning points to the continued reliance of liberal rule on the positive knowledges of experts. Its inclusion in the NPST as a professional standard points to the way in which such governmental processes themselves are being governed through advanced liberal techniques: the NPST’s professional learning standard is an indirect means for the surveillance and regulation of teachers’ agency in area of professional learning. Indeed, so important is thought the need to secure the governmental mechanism of teachers’ professional learning that it is now subject to more sovereign modes of authority and rule. While a basic requirement for teacher re-registration amongst a number of state teacher regulation authorities for several years (e.g. QCT 2008), teacher professional learning is now the object of AITSL’s *Australian Charter for the Professional Learning of Teachers and School Leaders* (AITSL 2012a) and comprises ‘an essential element’ in the ‘professional practice and learning’ component (AITSL 2012b: 6) of AITSL’s *Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework* (AITSL 2012b).

Conclusion

This paper adopted a problematizing approach to teacher professional standards in contrast to the meta-narratives of promise that characterize much of the research in this area and inform teacher standards policy. It analysed the NPST as an advanced liberal practice of government for shaping teachers’ conduct not only through teachers’ responsabilized autonomy but also through the surveillance and regulation of that professional autonomy which such standardizing allows. Through such analysis, the paper pointed to the disjunction between the explicit and calculated programmatic rationality of the NPST and the intelligibility of the practices of government in which the programme is both invested and translates. The paper argued that the strategic effects of such practices included the location of the practice of standardizing of the NPST within a specific set of power relations involving a double movement of autonomization and responsabilization of teachers. The paper noted that effects also entailed technologies of government which seek to produce the subjectivity of the actively responsible and calculable professional. Through such analysis, the claims of the

programmers themselves were brought into question and the self-evidence on which the standards rest effectively breached.

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Notes

¹ Dean (2007 and 2010) argues that the critical purchase of an analytics of government 'stems from the disjunction between the explicit, calculated and programmatic rationality and the non-subjective intentionality that can be constructed through analysis' (2010: 32). He argues that the 'disjunction between programmatic rationality and the logic or basic intelligibility of governmental practices is, I believe, absolutely crucial' (2007: 83). While not having received enough attention from the followers of Foucault—a point Dean notes (2007: 83)—the canonical study in this area would be Dean's (2010) study of the logic of empowerment.